



Acting Your SMARTS

Advice for the Caregiver

When Mom and Dad have the blues

By Kari Berit

There's nothing funny about depression. Especially when it involves your mom or dad. Well, except maybe when they're trying to convince you they're not depressed.

"I just need lots of sleep."

"The TV keeps me company."

"I eat. I just don't have much appetite."

It's funny how hard people with no visible sign of energy or appetite will work to convince you they're fine. But it's also more than a little sad. And it raises the sleepless-night-inducing question: What can I do about it?

Depression is the most under-diagnosed illness affecting older adults. While our generation takes therapy for granted, and a lot of our kids have been medicated since they were old enough to walk, our parents are from a generation unlikely to have a therapist on speed-dial. It's not uncommon for my friends to talk about what they're working on in therapy. My dad would never admit to having a therapist, let alone consider his sessions a topic for dinner conversation.

Sadness vs. depression

Our society doesn't embrace depression in older adults. Neither do our parents. I'm not suggesting we should. But it's a reality that can affect their lives. When it does, you need to acknowledge it – and then have a plan to help them deal with it.

Sometimes, all that's needed is listening. Think about times you've encountered sadness from your parents. How did you respond? Did you downplay it? Did you try to change the subject? Too often, we underestimate the power of simply recognizing their feelings and giving them a safe outlet.

Depression is more than sadness. It's an illness. My Grandma Gladys did not age in a healthy way. She isolated herself. She complained of loneliness and headaches. She often told me, "You don't know what it's like watching your friends die off."

She was right. And she was depressed. As your parents age, one place mortality begins to intrude is when they begin to lose long-time friends. Sadness is normal in such

circumstances – and depression can lurk in the shadows.

When you see this happening, ask your parents about their sadness. Let them talk. Don't try to solve their issues. Just listen – and let them know you care.

If they're more than sad – depressed in the clinical sense of the word – help them face it. Left untreated, depression only gets worse. But recognize that you may need to enlist help on their behalf. Are you the kind of son or daughter who can approach your parent directly and talk about changes in mood? If not, maybe their doctor can help.

Should you talk with their doctor?

A good one is priceless. Go with them to a doctor's visit. Let them talk, but listen to what they say. Don't be afraid to call ahead and alert the doctor, either. Older adults may find it difficult to talk directly about depression. But when a doctor knows to ask, they may find it easier to open up.

Should you ever ask a doctor to put a parent on medication for depression? It may be an answer eventually, but don't rush into it. Start by finding out what's really going on. Talking about it can help them accept a variety of responses, from "happy pills" to acupuncture to group therapy. When my mother died, my father attended a grief group. It wasn't direct therapy, but it sure helped him to be with others going through the same experience.

By the way, in today's fragmented medical world, don't simply assume the doctor will "get it." If their physician doesn't have the training (or the empathy), a lot of legitimate complaints can be tossed off to, "They're getting older, what do you expect?"

Depression is not a normal part of aging, any more than it's a normal part of life in general. But like aging, if we don't talk about it, it can become the elephant in the living room that everyone pretends not to see. When it's there, don't wait for it to make a mess. Point it out. Then help your parents deal with it.

Kari Berit (www.KariBerit.com) is the author of The Unexpected Caregiver: How Boomers Can Keep Mom & Dad Active, Safe and Independent (2007: Attainment Company). She helps seniors and their adult children create effective dialogue around things that matter.